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ABSTRACT

Critics have suggested that research on practice professions, such as teaching, and on their associated institutions could be strengthened by involving practitioners as research collaborators. As part of a larger investigation of a community-based teacher center, a study was undertaken to identify: (1) special issues inherent in a research design that stresses collaboration between practitioners and researchers; (2) differences in data and analysis as a result of practitioner involvement; and (3) differences in the "style" of research carried out by practitioners and professional researchers. The research design, and the recruitment, selection, and training procedures were modified, when needed, to allow for practitioner involvement. Four practitioners were selected and were involved in every stage of the research. Features of the practitioner research approach that were different from those of the professional researchers were: (1) acting rather than reflecting; (2) subjective involvement in the issue; (3) using everyday experience in questions and analysis; (4) using personal networks to gather data; and (5) building rapport. Practitioners brought resources and styles to research that could add important dimensions to data and analysis in some kinds of studies. Care needs to be taken that practitioners' methods do not lead the research into the nonobjective, nonrepresentational areas that some might fear. (FG)

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WHAT PRACTITIONERS CAN TEACH RESEARCHERS ABOUT RESEARCH

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Abstract

Some critics have suggested that research on practice professions, such as teaching, and on their associated institutions could be strengthened by involving practitioners in the research as collaborators. As part of a larger investigation of a community-based teacher center, a study was undertaken to identify how practitioners might be special in their approach to research. Several tendencies of practitioner research are analyzed, including a preference for action rather than reflection, a trust in feeling and intuition in addition to thinking, and an ability to use personal life as a source of information and data sources. The report also considers possible pitfalls in practitioner involvement and issues in organizing this kind of collaborative research.

Introduction

Social scientists have always taken for granted that much is gained from the training and discipline of social science research methods. Some critics have begun to ask what is sacrificed. It is possible that socialization into the research world and faithful adherence to the canons of research may cause researchers to miss out on crucial phenomenological knowledge about the settings they are studying and may result in research findings that are not judged useful by the kinds of people being studied. Paradoxically, researchers may lack important qualifications for certain kinds of research. Somehow practitioners themselves need to be involved.

This kind of criticism has arisen especially in fields such as education in which teaching, the central activity of the main practitioners, has not been subjected to sufficiently powerful analysis and formulation and in which years of research apparently have failed to result in significant school improvement. One solution has been to involve practitioners, in collaboration with researchers, in the design, conduct, and analysis of research (Institute for Research on Teaching 1979, Far West Laboratories 1979). This paper reports on a research project where "practitioner researchers" were integral parts of a research team studying a community-based teachers' center. The impact on the research of the practitioner involvement in the project was itself a topic of the study. We gathered empirical data about how practitioners did research. For example, we found that feelings and intuition were important ways of knowing not necessarily excluded by objectivity, that acting was as important as reflecting, and that personal experiences and personal networks

of practitioners were valuable resources for the research. Our findings should be of practical use to those seeking to maximize the benefits of these kinds of collaborative research arrangements as well as of theoretical use to those trying to understand the nature of research in a field with such a strong practitioner base. We first describe our research activities and theoretical rationale, then share issues in organizing this kind of research, and, finally, summarize our findings.

Description of Research

Teachers' centers are a relatively new organizational form, and there is much interest in understanding how they work. Most teachers' centers are run by teachers for teachers. Our proposal to study a center organized in accordance with a different model emphasizing community and teacher partnerships was selected in a nationwide competition under a National Institute of Education (NIE) contract. We sought to understand what the costs and benefits of this unusual model were and how specific organizational arrangements brought about these benefits and costs.

Our research plan called for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. For a period of one year, we conducted field observations and interviews in the center. We observed formal workshops, special events, consultations in schools, drop-ins, board meetings, staff meetings and informal daily life. We listened to participants and tried to reconstruct the perspectives which they used to make sense of their setting. The research team documented this data by filling out field data summary forms and had weekly meetings to discuss the evolving analysis. We also used more structured techniques. We

formally interviewed staff, board members, and various categories of people who used the center and those who did not use it. We conducted extensive statistical analysis of the documentation on the workshops scheduled during the entire history of the center.

Our research team consisted of two professional researchers and four "practitioner researchers." We adopted this team approach for several reasons. We felt we needed diversity in the research staff in order to understand the perspectives of the participants which included a very wide range of educators and community members. The urban community where the center was located was itself extremely diverse ethnically. Also we sought to investigate directly the notion that practitioner involvement in research would result in different kinds of research findings--possibly more useful to other practitioners--than that produced solely by professional researchers.

Thus, we had a study within the study. We were systematically investigating the research experience of the practitioner researchers in addition to studying the center. We interviewed them before and after their experience. We asked them to reflect on their own research experience as part of their on-going data collection. We asked them to write position statements before and after the study. We interviewed other center participants about their reactions to the research. We analyzed the nature of the data produced by the practitioner researchers. We observed the practitioner researchers in action. We sought to answer these questions:

1. What special issues are inherent in a design that stresses collaboration between practitioners and professionals in research?

2. How were the data and analysis different as a result of the practitioner involvement?

3. How does the "style" of research carried out by practitioners differ from that of professional researchers?

While our modest study cannot provide definitive answers to these questions, it does offer provocative data that need to be considered.

Theoretical Issues in Practitioner Research

Insider-Outsider Perspective

Researchers using qualitative or ethnographic field methods have always recognized that they walk a thin line. On one hand, they must remain "strangers," and on the other hand, they must become intimate "friends" (Powdermaker 1966). They need to cultivate the insider perspective and maintain outsider distance simultaneously (Bruyn 1966). Ideally, they need to see and interpret events in the way that insiders would, but with reservations.

Some have wondered about the potential power of training insiders to be researchers instead of vice versa (Whiting and Child 1955). Insiders have the benefit of an existentially firm grounding in the perspectives of the setting being studied, which they acquired in a natural way. All they need is training in order to acquire the reflective discipline of the researcher and links to the culture of other scientists. Many configurations are possible ranging from total participant to total observer (Gold 1958).

Many researchers using participant observation research have been remarkably successful in acquiring participant perspectives--sometimes so far as to "go native" and never be heard from again as researchers. Researchers from their perspective have generally felt that it is easier to train an outsider in participant perspectives than vice versa. Fundamental questions persist, however, about how even the participant observer researcher might not

be the same as an insider acting as researcher. How does the mind-set of the researcher--even in the relatively open form of qualitative field researcher--shape the data and analysis? By studying practitioner researchers we hoped to gather data relevant to this issue and in so doing illuminate both "practitioner research" and "researcher research."

The classic role of informant in field studies seems close to that of "practitioner researcher." Interested participants from the setting befriend the researcher and often begin to act as researchers--gathering data, suggesting research activity and offering interpretations and analysis (e.g., see Whyte 1955). Indeed, many field studies could not proceed without these roles of surrogate researcher being filled. In these studies, the researcher stays in control and ultimately frames the research and analysis. Thus, our data may also add to understanding of the informant role.

Many analysts realize the need to incorporate participant perspectives. Actual collaboration with participants is one of the least tried and analyzed methods of accomplishing this.

The Difficulties of Research on Practice and Issues About What Makes Research Useful

In the last decade, many critics began to wonder about the ability of research to explain professional practice in fields like teaching. Years of laboratory research on topics such as learning theory seemed to have had limited usefulness in explaining or improving teaching or learning in the everyday, real context of schools. Using phenomenological methods, several researchers (Lortie 1975, Jackson 1968) showed how teachers framed their worlds very differently from researchers. As a result of this critique,

many qualitative studies were undertaken which tried to capture teacher perspectives on their professional lives. Some even went so far as to incorporate collaboration between teacher and researcher in order to insure that the insider perspective would affect the analysis (Smith and Geoffrey 1969, Florio 1979). Our research is related in trying to pinpoint what is special about practitioner participation in research. Our research is different in that, unlike the classroom studies, our practitioners were not the key actors of the setting being studied.

The literature on knowledge utilization raised more questions about the role of practitioners in research. There seemed to be much potentially useful research available that was not being adapted or adopted by schools. Two of NIE's divisions, Dissemination and School Problem Solving, devoted significant effort to discovering why this was. Suggestions were made that the research world was alien to many educators and that special efforts were needed to bridge the gap. A variety of strategies were proposed, ranging from research validation panels to special brokers and linkers. Indeed, even the teacher center movement was seen partially as a way to create teacher controlled linkage settings which could help teachers to interpret and evaluate research findings. More radical critiques suggested that research might be less useful to practitioners not merely because no one helped them interpret it, but even more because it was framed, carried out, and analyzed by people who were distant from the daily world of practice, that is, researchers (Center for New Schools 1976). According to this view, research would become relevant to teachers when teachers became principal collaborators in the research. Several studies were undertaken with this model at their heart (Institute for Research on Teaching 1979, Far West Laboratories 1979).

For a variety of reasons, then, critics believed research conducted with heavy practitioner involvement might be very different than research conducted without that involvement. We set out to discover how it might be different.

Special Issues in Organizing Research With Practitioner Involvement

The process of organizing a research project when practitioners are involved, often cannot be the same as when they are not. In this section, we note specific places where modifications in normal procedures need to be considered.

Who Designed It

There is a paradox involved in professional researchers trying to identify how research would be different when conducted in collaboration with practitioner researchers. A professional researcher, after all, conceived and designed the study and most writing responsibilities fell to the researchers. We tried to overcome this difficulty by leaving the design very open (as explained below, the focus did change as a result of practitioner involvement) and by building constant introspection into the design. At all times, we were working on identifying how decisions about research were made. All involved concurred that the research was definitely different because of practitioner involvement. Nevertheless, anyone doing this kind of research needs to be sensitive to the point at which practitioners enter and the implicit limitations that may be imposed by a pre-set list of research questions and research design.

Recruitment

The role of practitioner researcher is unusual and a difficult one for many to comprehend. There is little in potential researcher's experience that relates. Special care needs to be taken in advertising the position so that potential applicants are not turned off or limited by the conceptualization of the role. Ideally, every teacher would consider research as part of his or her education role, as in John Dewey's (1903) model of the self-inquiring school. We found instead that few teachers considered research as part of their role, and the research courses they had had in their training had often done more harm than good--giving them stereotyped and negative notions about research. Similarly, community members had little in their experience that was relevant.

Few networks existed that could insure that news of these positions would find appropriate persons. As research of this kind becomes more prevalent, more channels may develop. We advertised in local community newspapers, and we contacted neighborhood organizations and school programs. We also advertised at the teacher center and in its publication. The ad in the help wanted section of a community newspaper read as follows:

> Teacher, Parent or Community Member to do part-time paid research on community educational organization. Send resume to . . . .

Selection

Selection offered more opportunity for paradox. What exactly should be the criteria for strong practitioner researchers? The danger is, of course, that professional researchers would select only people like themselves and thus systematically exclude practitioners with other orientations. What cri-

teria might be used other than those traditionally used for selecting researchers? Our internal selection memo stated the dilemma:

> * We want people who can infuse the analysis and research with the fresh perspectives of where they're coming from (e.g., teacher, parent, etc.) At the same time, do we want people who can adhere to fundamental research perspectives of objectivity, rational analysis, etc?

We were open to the possibility that the usual research qualities might not be what we wanted. Some of our experience in the interviews illustrates the dilemma.

> We asked potential practitioner researchers about a hypothetical situation in which they observed visitors to the center who were having difficulty finding something they were looking for. We were looking for the candidates' recognition of the research role being different than the service role. Almost every one of the candidates indicated to varying degrees that they would get in and help the visitor.

As we discuss below, this action-tendency may very well be one of the ways practitioner researchers learn about the world in a way different from researchers. Selecting practitioners who did not show this tendency might select those who could act like researchers, but it also might exclude valuable practitioner perspectives.

Identifying relevant background qualifications also posed problems. How much research experience did someone need before they no longer qualified as a practitioner researcher? Many of the teacher candidates had research courses in their backgrounds. Some of our community member candidates had undergraduate majors or a year or two of graduate training in a social science discipline. Those conducting practitioner research will need to consider carefully who qualifies.

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*We have used the convention of setting off observations from our experience in single space indented sections. This should help the reader see some of the basis of our analysis.

These problems confronted us throughout the selection process, but we think we found workable solutions. We sought people whose primary active identity was that of a teacher or a community member. Thus, we excluded people whose primary focus was on academics. We selected people who understood that research was somehow different from life as usual but who were not necessarily already socialized into the norms of the research world. We selected people who had some kind of curiosity about the center and who were not viewing the work just as a job. Finally, we involved a practitioner, the director of the center, in the selection process in order not have only researchers selecting. Notably her selection criteria focused primarily on the candidates' "personability," the likelihood that staff and users could relate to the person, and secondarily on his or her analytical skills.

The practitioner researchers finally selected had the following background:

W.A. -- Full time elementary teacher in the city system with ten years experience. Lived in the neighborhood.

W.M. -- Community member active in local community and religious organizations. Parent. Formerly a teacher at local elementary school.

R.R. -- Youth worker and community organizer in Hispanic community.

M.P. -- Teacher at alternative high school. Community organizer for Girl Scouts. Lived in neighborhood.

Training, Collaboration and Commitment

Training offered problems parallel to selection. Socialization is an important part of research. On one hand, we had to familiarize practitioner researchers with the research questions, background, research methods and theoretical orientations. On the other hand, we didn't want to train away

those native qualities that had special value. We took several approaches to these problems. We created a special role for them where their concepts and questions were important. We built in explicit sessions of analysis where practitioner perspectives were solicited regardless of relation to other research topics, and we built an evolutionary coding scheme for the qualitative data which required on-going contributions.

There are no automatic benefits that accrue from practitioner involvement without special efforts to give those practitioners a chance to affect the design and analysis. Indeed, previous discussions of "hired hand research" (Roth 1966; Lewis 1975) suggest uncommitted researchers tend to produce low quality data and that lay people without special involvement often tend to be uncommitted and hence produce low quality data. As Adams (1977) has observed elsewhere, lay people are typically given only isolated tasks and rarely are involved in the formulation of research problems or the analysis of data.

Our practitioner researchers were involved at every stage of the research and hence became very committed to the research. We offered training in research methods and theoretical perspectives but encouraged the practitioners to question our training and propose alternatives wherever possible. The discovery of appropriate training paradigms for practitioner researchers remains a fascinating theoretical and practical issue. Paradoxically, identifying the special qualities of practitioner research will help in identifying what qualities need to be protected in training.

Summary of Findings

In this section we identify features of the practitioner research approach that were different from those of the professional researchers.

Action-Doing Rather Than Reflecting

The research perspective, observing and reflecting, is quite different from the normal perspective of doing--especially when an issue is salient to the observer. All of our practitioner researchers found it difficult and unnatural to sit back. As mentioned earlier almost all applicants for the position responded to hypothetical interview situations with action rather than reflection.

One of our practitioner researchers dropped out of the project because she found the non-action perspective caused her too much tension.

> The time I spent and what I was doing wasn't useful. My job wasn't beneficial.

* * *

> I didn't want to be there as a researcher. A lot of times in workshops--it was a waste of time. It wasn't necessary to sit there--frustrating to hang around. The research process of asking why that person did that or why that person said that was frustrating. I don't like to analyze people that way--its too meticulous, too detailed. I don't like dealing with people that way." (Interview M.P.)

The other researchers often found the observation uncomfortable. They felt out of place without a valid role. All grew more comfortable but the feeling remained. R.R. noted that one of least comfortable parts of the work was this awkward observation:

> The birthday party was a problem. It's hard to feel comfortable - a private event for the family. All these activities and you can't participate. (Interview, R.R.)

Another one of the team said she often found herself participating before she knew what happened. She saw people who seemed lost or places where workshop leaders needed assistance, and she moved right in to help. She said she could gather better data while helping because she felt more natural. She was more naturally accepted by participants, and she could use her own reactions as data.

Anyone who had undertaken qualitative field research has felt this urge to participate. Often in participant observation research this urge is no problem. Clearly, our practitioners all felt the urge strongly. A design that did not allow limited participation by practitioner researchers would be a problem. Even more importantly, practitioners seem to come to know by doing. Acting is a way in which they make sense of the world. The researchers' typical reflective stance is not normal. We wondered, then, whether the knowledge that came from doing might be one unique contribution of practitioner involvement.

Objectivity - Stake in the Issue

Objectivity is perhaps one of the most sacred cows in the research barn. Practitioners doing research, however, seemed to place great reliance on their feelings and intuitions in addition to objective cogitation. Often, these feelings provided the team with valuable data. The use of these non-objective modes seemed to be another special contribution of the practitioner involvement. This subjectivity was not unrestrained of course, and the team worked on methods to contain it such as forcing individuals to reflect on their reactions and using the variety of subjective reactions among team members as data. Nonetheless, the variety and intensity of these subjective reactions

seemed to be a special resource available to our research because of practitioner involvement.

> Because of financial crises in the school system teachers failed to receive several paychecks on time. In a discussion of why teachers might not be using the center as much as they used to, W.A., our "teacher researcher," got very angry as she talked about demoralization and the anger many teachers felt at the lack of support from the community. These feelings were valuable data in our analysis.

* * *

> W.M., our parent researcher, often got very enthusiastic about workshops she observed at the center. She talked about her joy as a parent in working in these activities. When she was not enthusiastic about a workshop, we all knew something was different about the workshop and needed analysis.

Because our team members came from different segments of the community using the center, we could use their different reactions as data. Since we did not try to bring everyone to the same undifferentiated level of objectivity, we had a microcosm of the feelings shaping events and the center.

> Team members debated the timing of workshops. Evening times were not good for teachers who left the neighborhood after school and after school times were not good for parents who worked or had to take care of children. We saw the dilemma facing the teacher center staff as they tried to address the needs of different client groups and the dissatisfaction any decision generated in the group feeling unserved.

The nature of the vested interest practitioners have in a setting may also affect the research. Although the professional researchers often care about the setting, they come and go through many similar settings. For the practitioners, however, the setting is a more central part of their lives. Their involvement often went back into the past and would continue into the future.

> W.A. had devoted ten years of her professional life to the city schools and was concerned about the future of the children, her colleagues and the system. R.R. has worked for several years as a community organizer and wanted to be sure there were adequate institutions to care for the Latino youth. W.M. had made a long term commitment to the neighborhood and wanted to see it "bloom."

These vested interests insured that these practitioner researchers would be looking for data that would ultimately be useful in improving the segments of the setting about which they were concerned. The vested interests added a special kind of urgency to the research. As described below, it also aided in rapport building because the participants could sense the shared stake.

Using Everyday Experience to Raise Questions and Analysis

In their work and community lives the practitioner researchers were having experiences related to the research. They could use this everyday experience as a reservoir of questions to be asked related to research topics. Many of these questions might not be obvious to the unattached researcher. They had a rich access to historical data relevant to research and could infuse their analysis with a holistic connection to the on-going life of the setting. Participant observer researchers work very hard to cultivate this kind of connection with the setting they are studying. The practitioner researchers had this connection available without the enormous effort usually required for researchers to build it and also with a historical and phenomenological depth perhaps difficult to achieve by researchers.

> R.R. noted from his organizing activities that there were very hot issues being debated in the Latino community that he rarely heard discussed at the Center. We realized we needed to pay careful attention to the ways Center staff attached importance to issues.

* * *

W.A. noted that as a teacher in the public schools she was constantly getting brochures announcing workshops and activities for teachers. She never saw anything from the Center we were studying. We all agreed to pay special attention to how the Center advertised its activities.

* * *

M.P. reported frustration at the kind of assistance she got when she tried to find materials for the biology class she taught at the alternative school. The helper was too directive. The team analyzed the experience and highlighted for M.P. her particular teaching style and expectations for assistance. We also knew teachers with similar styles might have similar problems with that particular staff member's style.

Using Personal Networks to Gather Data

In their everyday life, practitioner researchers belong to numerous personal networks. We found that these networks often provided unanticipated opportunities for data collection. The multiple constituencies we had built into our team provided us with instant trial sampling in relevant groups. We knew we couldn't count on these networks in a statistical sense, but we had an ease in testing ideas that would not have been available otherwise.

In trying to understand how teachers spent their after-school time, we wondered how many had second jobs. W.A. did an informal survey of her colleagues to get a rough idea.

* * *

W.M. distributed brochures about the center at the numerous community activities she was involved in. The lack of knowledge about the center in the community made us ask questions about how the center notified the community about its activities.

Rapport Building

Field researchers typically manage to build good rapport with people in the settings they study, but only with much care and attention. Practitioner researchers help this process considerably. The practitioner research-

ers speak the native language without extensive learning required. Also, because they are like people already in the setting, there is less suspiciousness and the research team can project less of an ivory-tower, distant image. This can enhance the candor of participants:

> Near the beginning of the project the director of the center reported that there was no problem with the research team's entry. The research team members seemed to "fit right in."

Questions About Practitioner Involvement

Up to this point, we have stressed the benefits we have observed that can come from practitioner involvement. Each of these benefits can, however, become a liability. For example, the action tendency of practitioners can be a problem if they move into action where they should not or if they are so busy acting that they do not reflect. The strength of practitioners' subjective reactions to events can obscure rather than enhance understanding, if it totally blinds them to other perspectives. The use of practitioners' personal experience and personal networks for data collection can lead the research astray, if care is not taken to place their personal experiences within a more generalized framework. Finally, the use of practitioners' natural roles to gain entry or build rapport can backfire, if there are actors in the setting who customarily are not open to share with people in these roles.

Structuring the research so these practitioner tendencies do not become liabilities is essential. We found that using a team approach with professional researchers and practitioners from many constituencies of the setting worked to turn these tendencies into assets because each perspective was constantly assessed in the framework of complementary perspectives. We also

found that building self reflection into data collection and team analysis helped to countervail against detrimental effects.

We noted other additional tendencies of the practitioners which could possibly limit the research. The practitioners tended to focus on the center of an event rather than the periphery. Also, when something did not occur, for example, a cancelled workshop, they tended to think that that meant that there was no data to be collected. These ways of focusing attention are more natural than those of the researcher, but they may result in lost data.

> In a research team data review meeting, we analyzed field data from a practitioner regarding an introduction session given by the director of the center to a visiting group of teachers. The report concentrated on what the director said and did. Other members of the team asked about the action and comments of the visitors and we all realized the researcher had focused too much on the center of attention. She had accepted the local definition.

The practitioner researchers tended to be more accepting of what people said. They took people at face value. They probed less in interviews. Sometimes there was suspiciousness, but not the almost total suspension of belief and skepticism of the professional researchers.

Finally, the analytical goals of the practitioners tended to be more short term and concrete than those of the professional researchers. The researchers tended to look for structural changes; the practitioners seemed more satisfied with effects on an everyday level.

> In an analytical session one of the professional researchers expressed doubts that the Center's activities were making any basic changes in the school system or in the lives of children, teachers, or community members. Practitioner researchers suggested many concrete beneficial effects they had seen in the reactions of specific users of the center. They asserted that these effects were worthwhile in their own right and might add up to something significant.

Summary

Practitioner involvement in research is not a magic key to insight. Our preliminary study does indicate, however, that practitioners do bring resources and styles to research that are special and can add important dimensions to data and analysis in some kinds of studies. They can use their everyday ways of knowing and understanding and their backgrounds to inform and enrich the research. Care needs to be taken, however, to insure that their tendencies become contributions and do not lead the research into the nonobjective, nonrepresentational extreme that some might fear. Finding the right models for this kind of collaborative practitioner research is a great challenge facing future research methodologists and practitioner researchers. We cannot yet answer whether this collaborative kind of research will generally result in more adequate theory about practice or more useful research results, though participants of the center we studied said the results were useful and the process was much more agreeable than they expected. Certainly the researchers and the practitioners involved will never be the same.

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